



Advocating for teachers
and public education

**Connecticut Education
Association**

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***Testimony of John Yrchik
Executive Director, Connecticut Education Association***

Before the

Planning and Development Committee

Regarding

***House Bill No. 6388, An Act Concerning
Mandate Relief to Municipalities***

February 23, 2009

Good afternoon Sen. Coleman and Rep. Sharkey. I'm John Yrchik, the Executive Director of the Connecticut Education Association, representing more than 37,000 teachers in Connecticut, and I'm here to speak about House Bill No. 6388, An Act Providing Mandate Relief to Municipalities.

As written, this bill would suspend collective bargaining for teachers up to two years and freeze teacher salaries, benefits, and working conditions for up to three years. In the more than forty years that Connecticut has had a collective bargaining law for teachers, bargaining has never been suspended.

When collective bargaining resumes after two years, the proposed bill will require arbitrators to assume a limit in the property tax levy increase to 1% or the Consumer Price Index for the previous year, whichever is higher, for the purpose of making awards. In other words, even if this does not describe the economic reality of a town, arbitrators will be forced to act as if it does.

This isn't the only permanent change proposed. Under the proposed bill, the scope of bargaining will be dramatically restricted. Instead of salaries, hours, and other conditions of employment, teachers will be limited to negotiating over salaries, benefits, and matters of health and safety. The proposed bill goes so far as to prohibit subjects of bargaining (e.g., the length and scheduling of the school day and the length and scheduling of the school year), a condition rarely seen in state bargaining statutes.

In the first instance, I must take exception with the title of the proposed bill. Collective bargaining is not a mandate. It is a right conferred upon Connecticut teachers by the State of Connecticut. This bill does not remove a mandate. It strips a class of public servants of their rights. Let us be honest about what is being attempted here.

The rights held by Connecticut teachers have been secured through years of advocacy and struggle. Connecticut's binding arbitration law was passed only after a series of bitter strikes led lawmakers to recognize the need for finality and fairness in the negotiation process. And it has delivered on this promise for three decades. It took seven years of hard work to secure the right to bargain about matters related to the school day and year on the part of teachers and their organizations. The right of teachers to have a say in the fundamental conditions of their employment does not only make sense morally, it results in better-run schools, less turnover, and better learning conditions for students.

The bill proposed by Governor Rell would end decades of labor peace in public education and tear the very fabric that holds the institution of public education together. Because its reach will extend far beyond the immediate economic crisis, it appears to be motivated not merely by concern about the short term needs of municipalities but a particular animus toward teachers and their unions. When the rest of the state is enjoying the fruits of a recovery, teachers will still be paying for Wall Street's excesses.

If this bill is considered in light of the overall budget package, it becomes even more insulting. Governor Rell did not ask Connecticut's millionaires to pay even one-tenth of one percent more in income tax. Yet, she felt comfortable asking teachers to give up rights that would cost them many times that in the coming years. This isn't leadership. At least, this isn't good leadership.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about my remarks or other portions of the bill.